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SIPDIS

FOR WHITE HOUSE FROM AMBASSADOR JAMES C. KENNY

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SUBJECT: THE PRESIDENT'S MEETING WITH IRISH PRESIDENT MARY
MCALEESE - JUNE 26, 2004

REF: DUBLIN 867

Classified By: Ambassador James C. Kenny, reason 1.4 (d)

1. (U) This message provides information for the President's meeting with Irish President Mary McAleese at Dromoland Castle on June 26, prior to the start of the U.S.-EU Summit.

The Role of Irish President

2. (U) President McAleese became the eighth Irish President in November 1997. She was directly elected by the people and serves a seven-year term as the head of state; the head of government is Prime Minister Bertie Ahern. The President is the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, but Irish law requires approval by the Parliament and by the Government before any troops can be deployed overseas -- and then only to UN-mandated missions.

3. (U) Although she does not have an executive or policy role in her capacity as President, Mary McAleese has been extremely active in representing Ireland around the world, receiving foreign leaders in Dublin, and promoting peace and reconciliation with Northern Ireland. She has also been an active promoter of Ireland's economy, and led a delegation to China last year to encourage greater trade with that nation.

Northern Ireland

4. (C) Mary McAleese, a Catholic, is the first Irish President to come from Northern Ireland. Both she and her husband Martin were born and raised in Belfast, and their families suffered attacks during "The Troubles." They are both deeply engaged in the Northern Ireland peace process. Martin -- whose childhood home was destroyed in an arson attack by loyalist paramilitaries -- spends almost all of his time working quietly behind the scenes with loyalist groups, one of the most disenfranchised communities in Northern Ireland. Loyalist paramilitaries represent the most radical fringe of the unionist community, and Martin has taken on the challenge of persuading them to end their violent activity and enter the political process. Whereas Sinn Fein has used its influence to bring republican paramilitaries into the fold, the Unionist parties in Northern Ireland have held loyalists at arms length in protest over their criminal activity (e.g. drug smuggling), violent intra-community turf wars, and attacks on Catholic nationalists.

5. (C) Martin McAleese's work with loyalists is controversial, but he firmly believes in the value of Irish outreach. Martin has brought loyalist groups to Dublin (a first) to meet with Irish officials for private and honest exchanges. His efforts have the support of Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, who has also met with loyalist leaders.

Personal Information

6. (SBU) President McAleese -- whose 53rd birthday is June 27, the day after President Bush meets with her -- is married to Dr. Martin McAleese (an accountant and dentist). They have three children. Emma, aged 22, just graduated from university with a degree in electrical engineering and will spend six weeks in the U.S. this summer working at NASA headquarters in Washington. Sara and Justin are twins, aged 19; Justin is very interested in politics and hopes to attend the Republican National Convention in New York in August. President McAleese's professional background is in law and journalism. She is a barrister and former Professor of Law.

7. (SBU) Although President McAleese has not confirmed her intention to run for a second 7-year term this November, it is likely that that she will, and that she will face little serious opposition. Her approval ratings are in the high 80s/low 90s.

KENNY